

## Using Physical Activity to Support Mental Health Outcomes for Young People

Helen Tonks- King Edward VI Aston SGO Area



### Context, Intent and Target Group

#### Background Information



This intervention programme, delivered by Sports Birmingham, in collaboration with Birmingham SGO's, included 15 secondary schools, aimed to support Year 9 and 10 students identified as needing help with self-regulation, confidence, and emotional wellbeing.

In Birmingham in 2025, young people's mental health remains a growing concern, with increasing numbers reporting feelings of anxiety, stress, and isolation. Social pressures, academic demands, and the ongoing impact of digital connectivity continue to influence emotional well-being.

However, sport is proving to be a powerful tool in supporting young people's mental health. Regular physical activity helps reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression by releasing endorphins, improving sleep, and fostering a sense of routine. Team sports also offer vital opportunities for connection, building friendships, and improving self-esteem. In a diverse city like Birmingham, sport can also act as a unifying force, bringing young people together across cultural and social divides, promoting inclusion, resilience, and a sense of belonging. With the right support and access, sport can be a key part of a holistic approach to improving youth mental health across the region.

### **What was the aim of work?**

The programme has four main aims:

- Improved social connectedness
- A greater sense of belonging
- Acquisition of tools to support emotional regulation.
- Increase in physical activity levels.

### **Which outcome(s) did it focus on?**

- 4. To support the personal development of targeted young people through youth engagement and leadership

### **Which expectation(s) did it meet?**

- Using local insight and youth engagement to identify young people and schools that would most benefit from a targeted School Games offer.
- Developing a case study to show where you have made the most impact against local priorities, and through effective storytelling share your learning locally and nationally.
- Collaborating with key partners to inform the local and county offer to tackle inequalities and ensuring inclusive and safe practice.
- Planning for and increasing delivery of 60 active minutes for every child.
- Engage with a minimum of one secondary school to promote 60 active minutes practice, and share this within the county and where appropriate nationally.
- Co-design and deliver a broad and balanced School Games offer that is informed by insight and youth engagement and embeds positive experiences. It is expected that an SGO will facilitate a minimum of 12 targeted inter competitions/events/festivals with clear intent.

### **Community links**

- Active Partnerships
- Community sports clubs
- Leisure providers

**Intent**

This programme aims to:

- Champion youth engagement
- Develop leadership, character, life skills

We focused on young people co-designing a physical activity offer for their peers to improve their physical activity levels and help them cope with their everyday stressors. Students from year 9 and 10 were selected by their schools as young people who lacked confidence and were the least active in their school year group.

**Target group**

- Secondary Schools
- Specific Year Group
- 9
- 10
- Targeted Groups of Young People

**Aligns to Schools Games Intents of:**

- Develop leadership, character, life skills
- Championing youth engagement

**Implementation**



[\(Rachael Mackenzie discusses her life experiences with young people\)](#)

The programme delivery was split into 4 parts:

**- Initial Training Day (October 2024)**

Hosted at Mosely Rugby club delivered by Athlete Mentors Rachael Mackenzie and Tome Davies. This day was aimed at giving young people the space to speak about their challenges and barriers and to develop coping strategies through the power of physical activity, sport and play.

**- School Based Project (December 2024 - February 2025)**

Young people identified a group of young people in their school that they could target who lacked self-esteem, self-confidence and were least active. They co-designed an action plan of 6 sessions which they would then deliver back in their schools to their peer selected group. Some time in these sessions was ring fenced for conversations with each other and the sharing of coping mechanisms. Groups across the programme organised a range of activities including festivals, tournaments, activity sessions and dodgeball sessions.





(Students from Holte school, Birmingham creating physical activity opportunities for their peers)

### **Ninja Warrior (February 2025)**

Young people were invited to Ninja Warrior to share their experiences of their school based project, to reflect on their own personal journey and to challenge their own fears by taking part in the Ninja Warrior obstacle course.



(Young people from Aston Manor Academy developing their teamwork and self confidence)

Young people were taken through series of workshops with Sport Birmingham staff designed to give them the opportunity to feed back their views. This was an opportunity to shape the last part of the programme and to create a sense of belonging and ownership of their journey.

Young people also got to challenge themselves by taking part in the Ninja Warrior obstacle course. For some young people, this was a challenge to their own self confidence levels.



(A student from Aston Manor developing his self-confidence on the rings)



## ACTIVE IN MIND x NINJA WARRIOR BINGO

Name.....

School.....

Share your thoughts around Mental Health and Wellbeing in a workshop	Complete the inflatable course in 3 minutes or under	Challenge someone at the Gladiator game
Climb one side of Mount Sasuke	Ask for advice from an instructor to complete an obstacle	Attempt at least 4 obstacles on the course
Help another Wellbeing Leader throughout the day	Try the wall run 3 times	Take a school photo with someone from Ninja Warrior – remember to ask for permission!

When you have completed a task, please go and see a member of Ninja Warrior staff or volunteer who will tick it off – make sure you have done it first, if you need help to complete the challenge ask for advice!

- If you get a full line (up, down or horizontal) you get one chance to spin the wheel to win a prize as well as a School Games water bottle
- Or, if you get a full house you will win a foam finger, School Games merchandise and free return ticket to Ninja Warrior Walsall



(Students were also challenged to complete physical and mental health tasks throughout the day)

### Toca Social (May 2025)

Toca Social is an interactive football experience in the heart of Birmingham. This part of the programme was a final chance to gain insight into young people's experience and to celebrate the



[illegible]

(Students from Aston Manor Academy creating a storyboard of their journey)



(Celebrating the conclusion of the programme through interactive activity)

### **Impact**

At the finalisation of the project, young people ranked their top 5 areas of improvement from the beginning to the end of the programme:

1. Confidence
2. Mental Health
3. Participation in physical activity
4. Resilience
5. Leadership skills

Many students fed back that taking part in the programme had developed their own bravery, courage, effort, kindness and empathy which came across strongly in their storyboards produced at the end of the programme.

A behavioural unit school also attended the programme - this was the first time that they had been to an event due to fears over student behaviour. In the first session, this behaviour was very evident with students having to go outside to calm themselves down. By the end of the programme, students were able to sit and listen and even came up with a media board to help their peers with self-regulation. Many of these students interacted with SGO's and Sport Birmingham staff which was a challenge at the start of the programme. To even finish the programme was a huge achievement for these young people.

- 88% of students would recommend this programme to their peers.
- 74% of young people said that the skills they had learned would help them in later life.
- 70% said that they felt more confident and able to deal better with their stressors.
- 82% said they had become more active.

### **Challenges**

1. The programme worked with young people who displayed low self-confidence and were prone to anxiety. To have so many young people in one room for the training was challenging.
2. Schools needed to identify the right young people for the programme.
3. Transport to various host sites and locations.
4. Managing stressors at the events for young people.

### **Sustainability**

1. Participating schools now have 10 young people acting as their Mental Health ambassadors.
2. All schools were provided with the Active in Mind resources used on the initial training day in October 2024.
3. SGO's will continue to work with their identified group of young people through the school games programme at other events to build further confidence.
4. Schools are continuing to work with their ambassadors to co-create further opportunities for their peers in 2025-26.

### **Top tips**

1. Help schools identify the right young people for the programme.
2. Give schools dates / information as soon as possible so they can plan ahead.
3. Create "wow" moments for young people to create a sense of belonging.
4. Celebrate the achievements of young people, even if they are small!